

KNOWLEDGE MATERIALS

Children's work in the livestock sector

In October 2013, the Third Global Conference on Child Labour will be held. Most countries have ratified conventions on child labour. Yet, child labour remains widespread in many parts of the world. Agriculture (including livestock) is the single most important sector making use of child labour. Those children often face hazardous tasks and working conditions. Persistent rural poverty is one of the main underlying causes of child labour. Policies must address these root causes and promote decent work for adults in rural areas.

The impact of child labour on children and communities

Not all work undertaken by children is considered “child labour” to be eliminated. Age-appropriate tasks that are not likely to harm children’s health, safety or morals and do not interfere with a child’s right to education and leisure, can help a child gain useful skills and may have inherent social, educational and cultural value. However, much of the work children do in agriculture, including in the livestock sector, is likely to be hazardous and/or interferes with children’s education. When this happens, their human rights are violated, which can be detrimental to the sustainable development of the agricultural sector and to food security.

Reducing child labour in agriculture is not only a human rights issue. It is crucial for future decent (youth) employment opportunities, rural development, the reduction of poverty and the achievement of food security.

Understanding child labour in livestock

Worldwide, about 98 million children work in agriculture, which includes farming, fishing, aquaculture, forestry and livestock (ILO, 2013). That number represents about 60 percent of all child labour. Agricultural work also tends to be hazardous, as reflected in high rates of fatalities, accidents and occupational diseases. Children are the most vulnerable to these risks.

The livestock sector is one of the fastest growing segments of the agricultural economy and contributes 40 percent of the global value of agricultural output (FAO, 2009a). Furthermore, livestock represents at least a partial source of income and food security for the majority of the rural poor (FAO, 2009b). Livestock keeping in developing countries has deep historical and cultural roots and the involvement of children is very common.

Poverty remains one of the major causes and consequences of child labour. Lack of income and resilience to shocks often leads rural households to send young children to the field and pastures to supplement adult labour, even if this undermines children’s health or ability to attend school. This can trap children in low-paying jobs later in life. Low levels of education and poor health of the rural population hamper communities. It limits available capacities to develop agribusinesses, to innovate and to respond to shocks, thus perpetuating the vicious cycle of poverty, food insecurity and child labour.



Box 1: What is child labour?

A child is defined as any person under 18 years of age. **Child labour** is defined based on a child's age, hours and conditions of work, activities performed and the hazards involved. Child labour is work that interferes with compulsory schooling and damages health and personal development. Especially in the context of family farming and other rural family endeavours, it is important to recognize that some participation of children in non-hazardous activities can be positive as it contributes to the inter-generational transfer of skills and children's food security.

The **ILO Minimum Age for Employment Convention No. 138** (1973) (ratified by 166 countries) sets the minimum age for children to work at 15 years of age in general (the convention allows for certain flexibilities in specific circumstances). For work considered hazardous, the age is 18.

The **ILO Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention No. 182** (1999) (ratified by 177 countries) defines worst forms of child labour as all forms of slavery, trafficking of children, forced recruitment for armed conflict, use of children in illicit activities, sexual exploitation, and hazardous work. Hazardous work should be listed nationally. It is work which, by its nature or the circumstances in which it is carried out, is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children.

The nature of the problems associated with child labour in the livestock sector is well-known. However, the precise extent of their occurrence is not easy to establish, because of a lack of data disaggregated by sub-sector. This informational deficit makes it much more difficult to design effective policies and programmes to address child labour in agriculture, including in livestock. Available information tends to be patchy, outdated and often does not go beyond herding activities in pastoral settings. Despite these limitations, the sections below attempt to illustrate the main issues at stake based on what is known.

Work activities and conditions

Both girls and boys are involved in livestock¹ activities. They typically start herding and caring for livestock at a very young age (4–7 years). Aside from herding, children are involved in feeding and cleaning animals, collecting fodder and water and working with draught animals for ploughing. Worldwide, reports reveal that children also work in poultry (on farms and in their homestead), dairy production, slaughterhouses and other meat processing operations, though information on the scale and areas of occurrence is extremely limited.

When they are still very young, there appears to be little difference between the activities undertaken by boys and girls. As they grow older, however, boys typically get more involved in herding activities, while both girls and boys engage in caring for the animals.

Work conditions of children engaged in herding differ greatly across contexts. Some children herd a few hours a week, while others do so for days on end, with significant variations in climate, levels of isolation, physical and mental burden and exposure to dangerous environments. Children may herd either for an employer or

for their relatives. Child herders working outside the household appear to be most vulnerable to exploitation and verbal/physical abuse by employers. Children can even run into debt when they are forced to compensate for lost cattle and destroyed crops. Particularly worrisome are situations where children are trapped in bonded labour or are trafficked to engage in herding in and outside of country borders.

Children in hazardous work

Children are more vulnerable than adults when exposed to the occupational hazards inherent to working with livestock. Health problems can be caused by working long hours in extreme weather conditions, poor sanitation and hygiene, use of chemical products such as disinfectants, inhalation of livestock dust and animal-to-human disease transmission. This can be compounded by unclear boundaries between working and living environments. In addition, there is a high risk of injury when handling animals and sharp tools. Children may be bitten, gored, kicked or stamped on or develop musculoskeletal disorders. Long periods of isolation, fear of cattle raiders and punishment by employers, or overwhelming feelings of responsibility for the family capital can generate psychological stress that constitutes a major threat to the children's wellbeing.

Balancing education and work

Herding activities are generally difficult to combine with education, because they occupy children for most of the day. Migration can create additional obstacles. Many herders are school dropouts and some have never been to school. Once out of school, most do not return.

Girls often miss out on education when pastoralist families cannot afford to send all children to school.

The availability of quality educational services, in turn, also influences child labour. When schools are better, more affordable and safe, it is more likely children will attend school and spend less time working.

Despite the challenges, pastoralist communities do value education, being aware that schooling can lead to economic diversification of pastoral livelihoods if education is good and compatible with the pastoral way of life (Siele *et al.*, 2011). Innovative approaches that aim to address barriers to education for pastoralists include distance learning, mobile schools, school feeding programmes or cash transfers, as well as boarding schools, Pastoralist Field Schools and Livestock Farmer Field Schools (FAO and VSF Belgium, 2009).

Socio-cultural aspects of children herding livestock

Though herding is not the only task performed by child labourers in the livestock sector, it is a common activity that carries social and cultural significance. Herding is often viewed as a tradition in pastoralist communities, where for generations, families have involved their children in caring for and maintaining livestock. The future and survival of the pastoralist family is seen as depending upon the transfer of complex, local knowledge from parent to child. The cultural identity of communities is also passed down from generation to generation in this way (Carr-Hill *et al.*, 2005).



Box 2: Why child labour in agriculture (including livestock) is particularly difficult to address:

- Incidence of unpaid family labour
- No formal contracts
- Many hazardous activities in agriculture
- Children's participation in agricultural activities a deeply rooted tradition
- Work considered in private sphere due to continuity between household and workplace
- Limited coverage of family undertakings in national labour legislation
- Low capacity of labour inspectors to cover remote rural areas
- Enforcement of regulation difficult
- Limited self-organization
- Fragmentation of labour force

What can be done?

Addressing the issue of child labour in agriculture is an especially difficult task (see Box 2). In particular, the informal nature of the work and the blurred boundaries between the household and workplace mean that traditional “top-down” interventions are unlikely to succeed without the buy-in of families and other local actors. Therefore, a participatory approach should be employed as much as possible when considering the following recommendations.

Strengthen the knowledge base on child labour in livestock

Research institutes and academia, governments, international organizations and local actors should all contribute to improving the understanding of the nature, scope and risks surrounding child labour in the livestock sector in order to orient action. This requires supporting extensive and participatory research looking in depth at the incidence, causes, contributing factors, consequences, working conditions, contractual agreements, role of education and age and gender aspects of the different types of work within the sector.

National governments and development partners should support the systematic collection of data by developing key child labour-related indicators to be included in national surveys and censuses, as well as national food security and health information systems that regularly collect and analyse data.

Where they exist, **producers', employers' and workers' organizations** should all engage in identifying child labour and hazardous work in the livestock sector. They should also contribute to risk assessments and establishment or revision of the national hazardous work lists defining activities or circumstances prohibited by law for children. **Pastoralist networks and organizations** should also participate in research and collaborate with government bodies to find solutions specifically adapted to the pastoral way of life, including pastoralist-smart education systems.

Finally, **children working with livestock, parents and local communities** can all supply important information on the risks and hazards faced in this type of work. They can provide information on what types of work activities with livestock are perceived to be acceptable for children and under what conditions. Children can

also provide valuable information regarding their aspirations and what opportunities exist to change child labour situations.

Guarantee access to education

Improving access to quality education for all children in rural/agricultural settings is key in breaking the vicious cycle of poverty and child labour.

National governments should:

- Improve the availability and quality of primary and secondary schools in rural areas, possibly adapting the school calendar and timetables to make it possible to combine light, non-hazardous work with schooling;
- Introduce incentives (e.g. meal or cash transfer schemes) to get children into school by offsetting the costs faced by poor households to do so;
- Support the development of childcare services that will allow children, especially girls, to go to school and adults, especially women, more time to engage in economic activities.

Teachers' unions can support the provision of quality education tailored to livestock-raising communities, monitor attendance, and act upon child labour situations, raising awareness among families and working actively to keep potential school dropouts in school. **International organizations** should support governments to develop and implement school curricula relevant to the rural and agricultural context, and create educational/sensitization tools to help reduce child labour in the livestock sector.

Raise awareness on issues of child labour

Local, national and international stakeholders all have an important role to play in raising awareness on child labour issues in the livestock sector. Governments and development partners should team up with pastoralist networks and producers', employers' and workers' organizations to initiate dialogue at community level about child labour, education and decent working conditions. Actors within the local community should establish and participate in community child labour monitoring systems and promote standards for decent work.

Improve the policy environment and strengthen the legal framework

National governments should strengthen policies and legal frameworks to reduce child labour in the livestock sector. This can be achieved with the support of **international organizations** and the participation of **local stakeholders**. Key steps include:

- Integrating approaches to end child labour in the livestock sector into national poverty alleviation, agriculture- and rural-development-related strategies, policies and programmes;
- Establishing effective inter-ministerial coordination mechanisms to support the implementation of conventions and the application of protective legislation for children working with livestock;
- Adjusting national lists of hazardous work² to include tasks children should not undertake with regard to livestock.

Governments should create an enabling environment for producers' organizations and other livestock stakeholders to be actively involved in policy and programming processes at all levels, including through the creation and strengthening of multi-stakeholder platforms. **Pastoralists** should also be encouraged to strengthen and form their own organizations to be represented in national policy processes and actions relevant to the future of their children.

Support the sustainable reduction of child labour

In order for any effort at reducing the occurrence of child labour to achieve truly lasting results, it is necessary for **governments, development partners and local actors** to identify solutions that will help to mitigate the demand for child labour in the long term. Alternative practices and tools should be developed and their adoption promoted. Actions that can be taken include:

- Identifying substitutes for hazardous substances, technologies and practices in livestock production, improving working conditions in the sector for all workers;
- Supporting the modernization of farm technologies and the use of innovative agricultural practices in order to reduce labour intensity for the household and for children in particular;
- Devising methods to reduce the need, duration and strenuousness of children's work activities with regard to livestock (e.g. herding);
- Exploring in which specific situations alternative livestock practices, such as community-managed herding and rangeland management, can be useful for reducing child labour;
- Fostering integrated area approaches that combine awareness-raising on child labour in livestock with livelihood diversification and income-generation approaches, community-based monitoring systems, education services and infrastructure development targeted at reducing child labour (e.g. safe potable water close to homesteads and schools, and natural

resource management such as fuel-saving stoves and sustainable community forestry for biofuels).

Practice and promote responsible private sector behaviour

Companies and multinational enterprises involved in the livestock industry can work with governments and other stakeholders to ensure that children are not engaged in child labour in their supply chains. They must also work together to ensure that when child labour is present, children and families get the support they need to find alternative solutions. Companies can build on the guidance in the UN Global Compact Strategies (UN Global Compact Principle Five) for businesses and work with national stakeholders to further develop strategies for implementation. According to the Compact Strategies, enterprise responsibilities include: awareness of child labour situations in the livestock sector; adherence to minimum age provisions of (inter)national labour laws and regulations; exercising influence on subcontractors, suppliers and other business affiliates to reduce child labour; and implementation of mechanisms to detect child labour. Multinational enterprises should work together to develop an industry-wide approach to address the issue. In the community of operation, they should also support and help design educational/vocational training, counselling programmes for working children and skills training for parents of working children.

Conclusion

Child labour remains a major concern. It constitutes a violation of human rights and hampers economic and social development. It is a pervasive problem in livestock. Addressing the root causes will require integrated solutions to overcome poverty in livestock-producing communities. With the support of the international community, governments and other national stakeholders need to work on these solutions to ensure a better future for all children. As part of that solution, efforts must be stepped up to fill the substantial information gaps that presently impede the development of targeted policies and programmes to address child labour in the livestock sector.

Endnotes

1 Any domestic or domesticated animal including bovine, ovine, porcine, caprine, equine, poultry and bees raised for food or in the production of food. The products of hunting or fishing wild animals are not included in this definition.

2 In line with ILO conventions.

For more information:

Please contact FAO's focal point for child labour, Bernd Seiffert, Economic and Social Development Department of FAO (bernd.seiffert@fao.org) and visit the joint FAO/ILO website on Child Labour in Agriculture (<http://www.fao-il.org/fao-il-child/en/>).

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